

FIELD

SERVICES

Taking Care of Soldiers



In the Beginning

Until the early twentieth century the Army did not provide laundry services to its Soldiers.

Instead this work was performed by selected women who were paid directly by the Soldiers. Typically these were wives of Soldiers or other respectable women, who could also do mending or other services.



While the Soldiers were on the move, whether in the Civil War, the frontier operations, or for other reasons, there was no laundry support. They just did the best they could, which wasn't very good.

Lice

Lack of clean clothing resulted in the prevalence of lice in the nineteenth century. This very small, blood-sucking insect spreads rapidly, especially when people lived close together. They hide in clothing and otherwise take advantage of unsanitary conditions.



Soldiers might call them gray backs or cooties; and they considered lice to be an unpleasant but inevitable part of military life. Soldiers in barracks or in camp provided an ideal environment for the spread of lice. Conditions in the trenches at Petersburg were especially bad.

Everyone understood that lice could itch terribly, but they did not understand the full dangers of this pest. Lice carry disease, most notably typhus, a nasty and often fatal infection. Because medical science did not understand bacteria or how insects could spread disease, Soldiers did not realize how dangerous lice could be.

In reality clean clothing wasn't just a morale issue, it was a medical necessity.

Just before World War I, people began to understand the dangers of lice.

Beginnings of Quartermaster Laundry and World War I

The first change in Quartermaster laundry services came in 1909 when Congress authorized government laundry services at isolated posts, mostly in the West.

With little guidance post quartermasters developed their own laundries, and their own policies.



As the United States entered World War I, the Army constructed training camps across the United States, including Camp Lee near Petersburg. The huge numbers soon overwhelmed the local laundry facilities, but the government was slow to react. Authorization to begin construction of



laundry plants for the training camps did not come until August 1918, and they were just starting to operate at the end of the war.

These were all large buildings with heavy equipment. Quartermaster laundry only operated in the United States. The Army was not yet prepared to support Soldiers

in the field.

These years also marked a time of major advances in medicine, when doctors began to learn about bacteria and how they can be spread through insects. Unfortunately the Army was not yet ready to transform this knowledge into a real field laundry program.

World War I (Overseas)



Soldiers from all armies during the First World War lived and fought inside trenches. These were ideal conditions for the spread of lice and other unsanitary conditions.

The British and French had already established some laundry services for their soldiers, and the Americans attempted to follow their lead.

Unfortunately these efforts were too little and too late. The US constructed and designed mobile laundry plants. These consisted of four large trailers, pulled by a steam tractor that also served as the power plant. They could only travel on large roads, and could not get close to the front where they were needed most. Mobile laundry unit did not arrive in France until June 1918 and the Army was just beginning to receive regular deliveries of the units by the end of the war. The few



units were used for salvage operations.



By the time the fighting ended, over 90 percent of the Soldiers had lice. The significance of combat laundry services in 1918 lay in the precedent for future operations, not service to the Soldiers.

Salvage

World War I brought a new line of Quartermaster operations known as salvage work. Basically this meant collecting damaged clothing to be cleaned, sterilized, repaired, and returned to the supply system. Soldiers had the habit of just tossing their damaged clothing aside, or otherwise discarding unserviceable textile materials. Replacement with new clothing just would not have worked. In addition to the costs, the United States lacked the shipping space for anything but the necessary items.



The American Army collected the damaged clothing, often picking it off the ground, and then sent it to a salvage depot. Here French women sewed the mountains of torn clothing back together before it was returned to the supply system. By the close of the war the salvage system repaired and returned over 2.6 million items of clothing.

The Quartermaster also operated smaller clothing repair shops for minor damage, where the uniform could be returned to the Soldier.

Redeployment

At the end of the fighting Army leadership realized they could not send Soldiers home with lice. The Quartermaster Corps was called into action to resolve the problem, with the aide of the Chemical Warfare Service and the Medical Department.



Upon leaving the trenches Soldiers received weekly showers, often using chemical decontamination equipment. At the same time they received a change of clothing. Units received the showers and laundry services together in order to prevent the infected Soldiers from spreading lice. Continuous repetition of the process reduced the infestation rate to 3 percent.

Before boarding the homeward ships, the Army still wanted to remove any remaining lice infestations. At the redeployment ports of embarkation Soldiers turned in their uniforms to be disinfected while they took long showers. At the same time they received a quick medical check. Soldiers with lice had all of their hair shaved. After leaving the showers, they received clean underclothing. In the meantime their now sterilized uniforms were returned, but sometimes worse for the wear.

Between the Wars

It would be nice to think that the Army learned from the experience about supporting troops in the trenches, but this was not the case. The Army improved its ability to support troops in garrison, but made little progress at supporting troops in combat.

The mobile laundry equipment was used for garrison laundries. Likewise, equipment to support the World War I training camps remained in use between the wars.

From now on the Quartermaster Corps was expected to provide laundry services.

Unfortunately the problem of how to support Soldiers in combat conditions received little attention. Even though the technology for trucks was improving at this time, the Army made no effort to design new equipment that could be placed on trucks to follow the front lines.

Beginnings of World War II

In June 1940 the German Army defeated the French, and Great Britain was in serious trouble.

The United States began to mobilize in case we should enter the war. This included expanding the Army by drafting Soldiers and a massive building project to house the Soldiers.



Once again the Quartermaster Corps placed its laundry emphasis upon supporting the Soldiers at the training camps. New or expanded installations included large laundry plants, and where necessary the

Army contracted with civilian cleaners.

The Quartermaster Corps now began to consider how to support fighting soldiers in the field. At last they began designing truck-mounted laundry units and the other necessities for field operations.

Looking back we can say their efforts were not enough, but at least this was a start.

Field Services in World War II

During World War II, the Army defined field services to include many different functions, including field bakeries or typewriter repair. For our purposes we are interested in laundry, bath, salvage, clothing repair, and de-lousing.



Surprisingly lice infestation was far less during World War II. The frequent movements and greater dispersions of the Soldiers provided fewer opportunities for the lice to spread.

The Army did need to control lice among the POW's, the liberated personnel, and civilian populations. This time they used a new pesticide called DDT. It seemed like a good idea at the time; but they did not understand the long term dangers of this chemical.

Laundry

Even though planning for laundry operations had a slow start at the beginning of the war, the Soldiers did an impressive job of providing services under difficult conditions. They operated as close to the front lines as possible, and made a major contribution to the health and welfare of the Soldiers.



The first priority for laundry services went to medical units. Even today medical units will be a huge customer for laundry services. Second priority went

to salvage units. Third priority went to supporting the troops.

Even with the best efforts of the laundry units, Soldiers often lacked clean clothing. The Army simply did not provide sufficient laundry units to meet the demand.

These mobile laundries were mounted on heavy trucks. They were visible from the air, and thus vulnerable to air attack. The large size limited where they could go. In a fast-moving front they could not keep pace with the troops.

Consequently, the Soldiers frequently found alternative means to clean their clothing. Where possible they made arrangements with local laundries (usually French) to clean their clothing. Or else they just cleaned their own clothing with whatever soap and water they could find.

Fumigation

Woolen clothing could not be washed in hot water, but it still required disinfection. The Army used fumigation procedures to remove lice or any other pest.

Clothing was placed in chambers and a methyl bromide gas was released into the chambers. It served as a powerful poison to kill any pest within the clothing.



Methods for Laundry

Often the Army used bundles. to process laundry. Each Soldier was allowed a limited number of clothing in one bundle (usually 20 items). Upon receiving the laundry QM personnel used numbered safety pins to identify the clothing. These pins were similar to the ones shown here. After washing the laundry was sorted by owner using the pins. This was a labor intensive process.



The alternative method was simply clothing exchange. A soldier turned in his dirty laundry and received a different set of previously used clothing (including underwear) that was cleaned and sterilized. The Army used three sizes, small, medium, and large.

Clothing exchange might not sound so appealing to us, but it had distinct advantages for a combat situation. A Soldier did not need to worry about extra clothing, just what was on his back.



The process for sorting and returning clothing was labor intensive, and time consuming. By the time a laundry unit could complete the process, the customer unit might have moved on.

Typically the clothing exchange was used for the front line troops, often in connection with showers. Rear area units were more likely to use bundles or the services of local cleaners.

Clothing Repair

The Quartermaster Corps also collected and repaired damaged clothing, shoes, or other troop items.

They used either Soldiers or local labor to do the work.

During World War II every piece of clothing was important, and these operations saved resources.



Showers

In theory the Engineers constructed shower points and the Quartermaster operated them. In practice there were not enough engineers to go around.

Soldiers constructed showers using expedients, or else the Army might find local industrial facilities that had suitable showers.



How the system worked (In theory)

Ideally shower, clothing exchange, and repair were combined into a single operation to support the front line Soldiers.



About once every week to ten days, Soldiers would go to the rear for their shower. Upon entering the shower area they turned in their dirty clothing. After showering they received new cloths. They had their choice for size: small, medium, or large.

The old clothing would be washed, steam sterilized, and inspected. Torn clothing went to salvage facilities for repair before reissue to the troops.

For the infantry Soldiers, this was a welcome opportunity to be clean, if only for a short time.



Trench Foot

By late autumn and winter 1944, the problem of trench foot devastated the American Army in Northern Europe.

Trench foot is a crippling foot condition caused by prolonged exposure to cold wet conditions. Feet that are cold and wet for a long time lose the blood circulation. That can be painful enough in itself, but it also leaves the foot vulnerable to other damage. Dead tissue becomes vulnerable to fungal infections. Results can vary from extreme pain to loss of toes.



American Soldiers in Northern Europe were just not prepared for the cold wet climate that autumn. Consequently they did not make the effort to keep their feet dry. Trench foot hit with a sudden fury.

The best defense against trench foot is a pair of dry socks at least daily.

Consequently the QM laundry units began to process sock exchanges. Units collected the wet socks and received dry socks in return.

With major command emphasis upon sock exchange and dry feet, the outbreak subsided.



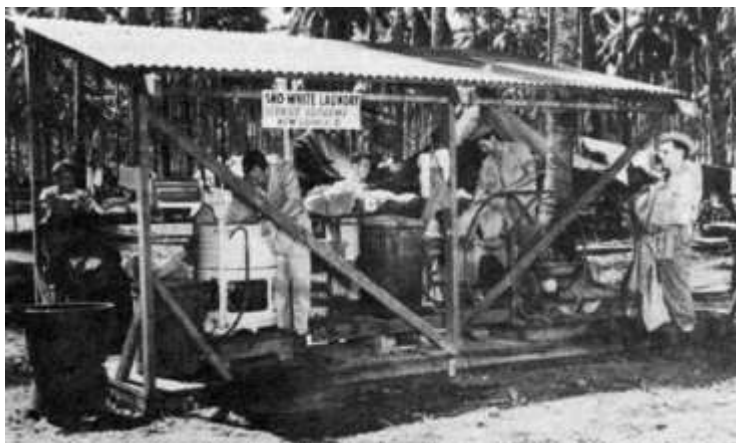
Pacific Theater



Laundry and field services was difficult enough in Europe, but incredibly more difficult in the Pacific. Here the armies fought in jungle islands, with a tropical climate that was hard on Soldiers and their uniforms.

In Europe the Army could often find local civilian resources to help when the workload overwhelmed the laundry units. There were no local facilities in the Pacific, just the jungle. Even finding clean water could be a challenge.

Unlike Europe, supporting units in the Pacific could not just move down the road as the lines moved forward. They shut down,



prepared to board ships, traveled to the next island, unloaded, and then resumed operations.

Laundry units might be closed for weeks.

Private George Watson

George Watson entered the Army in September 1942 and joined the 29th Quartermaster Regiment after completing his initial training.

On 8 March 1943 his ship encountered Japanese bombers. near New Guinea After taking several hits the ship sank and the passengers and crew abandoned the ship.



Like many of his fellow passengers Watson was left in the water; but he was a good swimmer and capable of reaching the life rafts. Instead he chose to find his drowning comrades and pull them to the life rafts. He continued to save fellow Soldiers until he was overcome by exhaustion and drowned when the ship pulled him under the water.

Watson's courage that day met the standards for the Medal of Honor; but at that time the Army would not award the Medal of Honor to African American Soldiers. Instead he received the Distinguished Service Cross posthumously.

In 1997 the Department of Defense reviewed awards given to African American Soldiers to determine which ones were denied the Medal of Honor due to their race. At this time Watson was awarded the Medal of Honor by President Clinton. Today the medal is on display in the Quartermaster Museum.

Korean Conflict



Field services during the Korean Conflict relied upon the techniques developed during World War II. This was a smaller war, and the field services units were not so overwhelmed as in World War II.

Soldiers on the front lines could expect to go to a regimental shower and clothing exchange point about once a week. Once again sock exchange became a high priority for preventing trench foot.

As usual, medical units became the big customer for clean laundry.

In the rear areas, the bundle system remained in place, with all the labor of sorting the bundles.

Vietnam

The Army entered the Vietnam Conflict without sufficient laundry equipment to support the rapidly growing numbers of Soldiers. Much of the equipment was aging and in poor condition.

New and better equipment began to arrive in the time following the American entry into the war.

Even with more equipment, the Army field laundry units could process about 45 percent of the requirements. The remainder of the work was performed under local contracts.

Soldiers in the front often relied upon clothing exchange



Since Vietnam

During the years following the Vietnam Conflict, the Army relied upon a combination of military units and contracted support.

Military units provide an indispensable ability to deploy quickly and to be available when local support or American contractors simply were not available.

For the remainder of the 20th Century, a unit known as the Corps Support Command (COSCOM) kept a small laundry and bath capability to support the maneuver units.

Desert Shield/Desert Storm

In 1990 Iraq unexpectedly invaded its neighbor Kuwait. In response the United States deployed over 500,000 Soldiers, first to defend Saudi Arabia, and then to liberate Kuwait. Other nations joined the coalition.

In the rush to place combat forces into Saudi Arabia, the American commanders limited the numbers of logisticians, including field service units. As a result the Army turned to Saudi Arabia for support. Soldiers used expedient methods to stay clean until the logistical system could fall into place for supporting the Soldiers.



Other Operations

In 1993 large numbers of Haitians attempted to enter the United States by crossing in small boats. In response the United States Coast Guard intercepted them and moved them to a holding area at the US Navy facility in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.



Guantanamo Bay was still operated by the US Navy under an existing lease with Cuba, despite the otherwise difficult relations. There were no local facilities to support this sudden influx of people. Yet in a situation like this they required sanitary services to prevent spread of disease.

The 289th General Supply Company sent a laundry platoon to Guantanamo to service both the Haitians and the US military. Their military status made them readily available and they quickly established operations that maintained sanitation in these close conditions.



When American forces conducted peacekeeping operations in Somalia beginning in the fall of 1993, the 16th Field Services Company deployed its laundry and bath units to support the operation. Despite the unit's speed in moving, actual service to the troops was delayed because the containers with the necessary supplies (soap, marking pins, etc.) were placed on slow moving ships.

Once the supplies and equipment did arrive, the unit processed about 250 bundles per day.

Recent Years

As American Soldiers have deployed to Iraq, Afghanistan, and other areas in operations they still require clean clothing. During a single day of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the Army required 790,000 pieces of clean laundry.

For the most part this has been managed by contractors. Nevertheless the need for trained Soldiers remains.



Laundry Advanced System

At the beginning of the 21st Century the Army laundry systems still used too much



water,
generated
waste

water,

created the smell of diesel fumes in the clothing, and required a lot of labor to sort the bundles. In response the Army introduced the new Laundry Advanced System.



The new equipment uses automated systems to detect problems and to monitor the functions. It recycles the water, using a distillation process. This feature allows it to operate in areas with a limited supply of clean water, and it is better for the environment. A steam drying system eliminates the diesel fumes in the clothing.

Clothing is bundled together in a meshed bag. The old process of sorting by pins is no longer required.



Regardless of how the service is performed, the need for clean clothing and the opportunity for showers and other means of personnel cleanliness will remain with the Army. It is not just a matter of personal comfort, but also a medical necessity.

There isn't anything that affects a person's well being more than those things which the Quartermaster Corps has to do. . . . and one of the things that affects his daily life, his health and comfort, is the way his clothes are taken care of by the laundries.



LTJG Edmund Gregory
Quartermaster General
1940-1946